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2x05 Mixed Nuts



written by: Michael A. Haines & Michelle Makariak

Executive Producers: Michelle Makariak and Jen Hooks

Special Edits: Special Hellion & Allan J. Sanders

Dialect Editor: Sophie Richards Head of Animation: Jaerowyn

Art: Aurora Proofreaders: Jaerowyn

PDF Creation: Michelle Makariak

Mal watched her through the shuttle window. He'd been watching for her since they'd left Churchill. He hated leaving her. Every time. Made him remember how she looked when he found her. The caked on mud, the gaping holes where parts used to be, the port engine leaning about twenty degrees more than it should have been. But it also reminded him how she fought like hell getting up that first time, how she bucked and spiraled even under his steady hand. Reminded him how proud he had been and how—when she'd knocked him on his ass breaking atmo—he'd been gorram glad to be there.

"You're coming in too fast. Have you even told Wash we're inbound?" Inara said, as she entered the cockpit.

Mal turned to look at her, trying to ignore the smell of jasmine that seemed to be everywhere. He felt his hands tightening on the wheel. "That's the beauty of ownership. I don't have to."

Inara scoffed and moved in behind Mal, pulling back on the shuttle's throttle. "You're about to set off the proximity alerts."

"Good. Let's 'em know I'm coming."

"This is still *my* shuttle."

Mal wanted to let that slide. They'd had a good few hours on this trip but seeing Serenity out in the black, glowing in reflective light...

"Ghosts don't own shuttles, Inara, they only keep 'em for a while."

Inara felt that one immediately and stared out the window a moment before reaching forward again and grabbing the throttle. She pulled back hard and the sound of the front jets blared into the room as the shuttle tried to stop against inertia.

"What do you want from me?" Her voice was tight and on the verge of breaking. "We've been getting along well lately. Why are you so threatened by that?"

Mal scowled. "I ain't threatened. And I don't want nothing from you except the rent you pay. Might be nice if you stopped complaining 'bout the jobs we take too."

Inara scowled and pushed the throttle up again, "You wouldn't even have this job if it weren't for me."

"We got this job because of what you *do*. And while I'm not altogether ungrateful, I am a little *bai si bu jie* about why."

Inara didn't answer that.

"She's your ship," she replied, throttling down the shuttle and standing up, "You can take her in any way you want."

Mal felt it again; the sense that one day Inara would be nothing more than an annoying little nostalgia creeping in at the wrong time. He glanced at her tight expression as she moved through the drapes and into the back of the shuttle and sighed. He already had plenty of ghosts, didn't need her haunting his dreams as well.

He grabbed the mic and clicked it on. "Wash, we'll be docking shortly. Tell Kaylee to get her ready to leave in a hurry."

Wash's voice echoed into the void, "Sure thing, Mal. What's with all the stopping and starting? You guys having trouble? You know, if the shuttle's a rockin', don't come-"

Mal turned off the receiver and kicked the floorboard. Outside, the shape of Serenity continued to grow.

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"What do you mean there's no food, *Jayne*?" Zoe glared at the big merc coldly. "You were told to get supplies. Supplies are food and water. Supplies are things that help keep us alive."

"Guns and ammo kept us alive plenty of times," Jayne responded staring into the near empty pantry. "'Sides, what do you call those?"

Zoe reached out and took one of the gray rectangles from the shelf. She held it to her mouth and blew a small cloud of dust into Jayne's face.

"I call that something ain't fit to feed the Alliance. These should have been tossed two years ago."

Kaylee, half hidden behind Book and watching with avid interest, took the bar from Zoe's hand and slapped it down on the counter. "Or used to patch the hull."

"If you'd wanted someone to go grocery shoppin' you shoulda sent Kaylee."

Zoe slammed the pantry covers shut, "I sent you, Jayne. Not Kaylee. Not Book. *You*."

"Then you shoulda been more specific. When I hear supplies, I hear things that go boom and 'less you want to be throwing lettuce next time we get into trouble—"

"Do you not remember me pointing at the kitchen and saying food supplies?" Zoe demanded.

"I might remember somethin' like that. Maybe. But there was this gun show..."

A distant clang against the hull made Jayne finish his defense early.

"The Cap'n ain't gonna be happy when he finds out." Kaylee offered.

"And how's he gonna find out?" Jayne growled.

"I think it'll be pretty obvious when he passes out from hunger."

"Things can't be that bad," Book interrupted, inspecting a decaying chunk of protein. "I can probably make something out of this. There are plenty of spices still left, and well, if you cook something long enough..."

"We're having a cookout?" Wash asked as he entered the kitchen. "Because if we are I am pretty sure I'm the only one dressed for the occasion."

"No cookouts here. Not for a while."

Zoe's tone made Wash stop in his tracks, his gaze darting from Jayne to his wife. "Should I be getting a hose?"

"Jayne forgot to buy food. Zoe ain't too pleased about it," Kaylee offered.

Wash nodded, "Oh. Well the Captain should be here any second."

"And so I am," Mal said stepping into the kitchen. "Now does anyone want to tell me why my entire crew is standing around looking at the cupboard?"

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Simon examined the tube against the small UV light in the lab. He tried to put the other thoughts away into the back of his mind, tried to file them under a heading that would allow him to deal objectively with the thought that he was going to be experimenting on his sister. Life in the black had become harder than he ever thought possible. Medicine was a true commodity out here, something to be bought and sold like so many heads of cattle. He wasn't sure how anyone actually managed to survive out here.

Inside the core, he would have River hooked up to all the best equipment. He could put her through a proper research and testing regime, and would at least be able to step outside once in a great while to take in the blue sky of Osiris without having to fear for his sister's life. The blue liquid in the tube reminded him of this more than anything as he swirled the contents around in front of him.

"Blue is more than hands," River said disrupting his thoughts, "It's the color of sky and of the inside. Into the blue is where you took me when I was sick. Out of the blue is what you're trying to do."

Simon smiled at her and tried to push all those thoughts of regret and wanting into a darker corner, somewhere River wouldn't be able to see them.

"River, I'm sorry. I've been up a while now. I shouldn't have been..."

"Simon, I know."

"I'm almost done," he reassured her, "We've been running so low on everything these days that I wanted to try to come up with something else. Something that will help us stretch these supplies even further. I think I've been able to create a new compound. Hopefully it will help you relax."

"I am relaxed, Simon. Maybe you should take it."

The smile on her face was half love and half condescending.

He smiled back the way he had done a hundred times before, "I'll sleep later, mei-mei."

Simon took the tube and poured a fraction of it into an injector, placing the rest of the tube into a holder on the counter.

"This will make you feel a little strange at first, but it should wear off quickly. This is a small dose and I just need you to keep me updated as to how you feel."

"This will make you happy?"

Simon pressed the injector against her bare shoulder and pressed the button. "What would make me happy is getting some more supplies."

River cocked her head in such a way that Simon felt his heart rate jump. The drug shouldn't have affected her that quickly. It should have been slow acting. He would have to—

"There's Pacinol and Anfredrin upstairs now, Simon," her head slowly twisted to the other side, "Jayne's in trouble again though."

Simon's eye went wide, "River, what do you mean? Someone went for medical supplies without me?"

"Nope," River said playfully now, "Also yes."

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"Well, Jayne," Mal said staring at the thin bricks of protein, "You're a big man."

Jayne, caught off guard, took this as something to be proud of and adjusted his stance.

"Damn right I am."

"And you'll feed a lot of people," Mal continued, "I think Captain's privilege means I get first dibs on the rib meat."

Wash moved behind Jayne and poked his arm with his index finger. "At least if we hit Reaver country again we'll be able to give them a run for their money. Or whatever they have..."

Jayne knocked the finger off of him, "Ain't nobody eatin' me, little man."

Zoe gave Wash a look. "Reaver jokes?"

"What? It's not like I made fun of Chinese food..." Wash's words trailed off as a warning alarm blared from above. He took in the serious looks from the rest of the crew, "Why am I always *here* when that happens?"

Wash, Zoe, Jayne and Mal rushed off toward the bridge and Kaylee went straight for the engine room handing off the protein brick to Book as she did. He brought the bar up to his nose and took a whiff. The scent was not unlike something he'd smelled on Persephone when he'd been forced to use one of the public washrooms.

"Nothing a little coriander and basil won't fix," he said to no one and took another go at smelling it, recoiling worse than the first time, "Maybe some oregano. Yes, lots and lots of oregano."

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On the bridge, Wash was staring into the main display on his console.

"Something fast is coming right for us. And might I add just a bit weaponry-looking," he told Mal.

Mal looked at the screen over Wash's shoulder. The ship was slim, new and fast looking. It wasn't a ship built for simple pleasure sailing.

"Jayne?" Mal barked.

"What?"

"You want to tell us what else you did down there?"

"No."

Mal took his eyes off the screen long enough to grab the mic, "Kaylee, I need her ready to get the hell out of here. Sooner is better than deader."

"She's been sittin' cold, Cap'n. I can't just kick her awake," Kaylee's voice was as calm-stressed as usual, only slightly audible above the clamoring of engine noises.

"Kick, punch, make love to her I don't care, just get her up!"

"I'm beginning to understand why you haven't found yourself a gal, Captain," Wash said pushing the yoke ahead and moving Serenity out of orbit with the main thrusters.

Mal slammed the mic down into its cradle, "Jayne, I got no time for this so you best be telling me why my boat is about to be shot full of holes."

"You shoulda seen those prices down there. I was the one bein' robbed—" Mal's glare cut Jayne's excuse short, "Hell, Mal, I just took a little something for myself. Made it so the deal was fair."

Zoe stepped in between them and leaned across the console and spoke to Wash, "Are they signaling us? I mean could they just be passing on by?"

"Not with that trajectory. I'd say they're not likely to be the wordy type."

The cabin suddenly lit up in a bright orange flash.

"What in the *di yu* was that?" Jayne asked.

Mal knew what it was immediately, "Arms dealers, Jayne? You had to go and piss off arms dealers?"

"It was just a dumb ol' gun show! I didn't see no heavy weapons...you know, s-s-sorta. I mean, it was just one little missile."

Zoe and Mal both grabbed at the mic, "KAYLEE!" they yelled simultaneously.

Serenity let out a huge creak as her main drive flared and Wash sent the ship pulsing into the black.

Without a word Mal left the cabin, his boots heavy against the metal floor. Wash and Zoe stared at each other and then turned to Jayne who shrugged and put his thumbs into his pants pockets.

"What? Ain't like we died."

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River moved into the kitchen taking advantage of the way everyone always seemed to not look at her directly. Shepherd must have been cooking in here all day as the kitchen was nearly uncomfortably warm. But she didn't mind, she felt like she was wasn't even walking on the floor. Her legs and arms were balloon-like and all she wanted to do was float around the room and tell everyone how happy Simon had made her. She knew it was the meds he'd given her and that it was temporary, but she didn't care. She just wanted everyone to be happy with her.

The Shepherd was at the stove stirring the big pot of brown stew. He brought the spoon to his mouth and River watched as his eyes squinted in what seemed to be pain. She moved closer to him as he threw in a handful of some dried powder.

"Hello, River," he said to her. His fear of her was always much more carefully hidden than the rest of them managed. She suspected many things about him, but she was never able to read him the way she thought she should be able to. Still, he was genuinely kind toward her and it made her feel closer to the ground when he was near.

"Is that a stew?" she asked Book.

"It's supposed to be," he said, laughing at himself. "I'm almost certain it won't kill us."

River smiled back, "Can I help?"

"Oh, it's done already. I believe I'm only continuing to stir as some sort of primal defense mechanism," Book winked at her.

River laughed, "Do you think everyone on Serenity should be happier?"

Book stopped stirring the stew and took an extra moment to taste it and grimace before turning to her.

"I think happiness is a state of mind really. I find that you can be happy even under the worst conditions. Is there someone specific you're concerned about?"

River shrugged. She wanted Book to leave now, "No. I just want everyone to be happy the way Simon wants me to be. Can I stir some?"

Book put on a broad smile, "Of course you can. I can set the table while you do that. Rest of them should be along shortly. Where's your brother? Is he coming to dinner?"

She nodded and took the spoon from his hand. The brown substance resisted her efforts before giving in to the motions, "He wanted to talk to Mal first."

"Well, I appreciate the help. I'll get the plates."

River watched Book turn his back on her and move to the table. She let the blue tube she'd been carrying in her sleeve slide down and fall into her palm. "Everyone can be happy today."

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"I'd like to ask you something," Simon said finding Mal in the corridor just outside the cockpit. "River said she heard there were some new medical supplies onboard."

"She *heard* that did she?" Mal said, already growing frustrated with the conversation.

"Well, if there are some new supplies I should take a look at them. After all, why would someone get medicine without me?"

"No one did anything like that, Doc. I don't know what your sister has been feeding you, but the only supplies brought on this boat are what Inara and I brought back with us and a big bag of nothing in the food department courtesy of Jayne."

Simon moved in front of the Captain, blocking the hallway "She sounded very sure of herself. What is the stuff you brought back?"

Mal held out his arm and pushed past him, "The job and none of your business."

"Can I at least take a look?"

Mal stopped, "No you may not. And I will tell you here and now that if I catch you anywhere near it you'll be missing parts you wish you had kept. *Dong ma?*"

Simon did not offer a reply. Instead, he held up his palms in mock defeat and walked off down the corridor.

Mal watched him leave.

"Sir?" Zoe said from behind him.

Mal turned to face her, "Zo."

"Sir, this mission - I know Inara helped set it up and it all sounds true enough—run some supplies to a rendezvous point—but it strikes me as a bit odd. I know we don't ask too many questions, but that ship we just ran from back there, could they have been after something else?"

"You know what I know. Inara is a lot of things but she isn't easily fooled or given the run around. Frankly, given the state we're in and the lack of funds to change that, we don't really have a choice."

"Things do seem to be getting darker these days. Might be getting in over our heads soon."

Mal put on his big smile, the one that told you everything you needed to know, and right now it was telling Zoe he couldn't agree more.

"We're already there."

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Book watched the others eat with a distance he'd not felt in a long time.

He was hot from cooking all day and the stew sat in his stomach like a rock turning his thoughts as black as his mood. He watched River with a sneer on his face. The way she floated so easily between all of them as if her mere presence on this ship did not endanger all their lives made him grind his teeth.

She stared right back at him and he shoved her intrusions aside as much as he could.

"You got a problem girl?" He said in a tone that made the others look over.

River did not budge, "We are not our patterns anymore."

Book smiled, letting the tension release itself through the act. He rolled his head on his neck to release even more, "I suspect we are all tired, River. And this stew is not worthy of the effort I put into it." He turned to the rest, "For that I am sorry. Hopefully we'll get proper supplies wherever it is that we're going."

"Oh, it's not that bad," Kaylee said holding another bite in front of her, "I kinda like it. It's different s'all."

"Nothing wrong with it. Two shades better than the humble pie we been eatin' lately," Jayne said, dousing his latest batch with hot sauce.

Wash finally took a bite and winced, "Well, it's not the worst thing I ever had. Of course I was a big dirt eater as a child. Well some of it was dirt. We had this cat—"

"Wash!" Zoe cut him off, "You ever spend a week without any food at all, you appreciate what you get. Thank you, Shepherd."

"Look, all I'm saying is we're not going to have to go hungry that long. I mean, we could have waited. We're what? A day out from the rendezvous? Don't get me wrong, brilliant effort Shepherd, but I can't eat this three or four meals in a row. We'll have money soon enough—"

"You mean if we don't screw it up?" Mal said putting his spoon down into an empty bowl and pushing it away from him. He stared across the table past the empty chair but his words were harsh and meant for them all. "You mean if we actually get paid? If my crew finally keeps their hands out of my cargo? If we don't accidentally shoot the client or space ourselves while cracking jokes and slapping our knees?"

"Captain—" Zoe began.

"What you're going to do is eat what's been put in front of you and shut the hell up. We ain't got luck to begin with and all we seem to do is think we can buy it on credit. Well I mean to tell you that it can't keep. We wreck this job and the next stop is our last."

They sat in silence a moment or two longer, the tension growing as thick as the liquid in their bowls.

"We're all doing what we can," Simon finally offered, "I think maybe we all need a break."

Mal wiped his mouth and stood glaring at Simon, "The friendly discussion part of this meal has passed, Doctor."

"All I'm saying—"

Mal glared until Simon stopped talking then he gave one final look around and turned for the bridge. "Shepherd, that was as fine as anything we deserved."

Everyone looked at Jayne.

"What the hell did I do? I'm eatin' two bowls already!"

"Do you not remember being shot at?" Zoe said. "I don't recall that had anything to do with us."

"Aw, hell we outran 'em didn't we?"

"Did that ship look like it was full of people who quit easy, Jayne?"

Jayne took a big bite of stew then stood and left the table. Zoe gave him a glance but went the other direction after Mal, Wash following behind. Simon looked over at Kaylee who smiled in return.

"Well, I'm glad nobody brought up Inara," Kaylee said.

Book returned to the table and starting grabbing the dishes left behind, "She's where she needs to be."

"But they been getting along right? I mean, these last few weeks it hasn't been so bad."

Simon noticed he was starting to feel warmer. He wasn't sure if it was a bad reaction to the stew which seemed impossible given it should just now be starting to digest and release who knew what into his system.

"The Captain is a fickle man, Kaylee. Who knows what happened to them down there," he said adjusting his collar.

"Well it ain't right—her not eating with us. She deserves better than that." Kaylee stood and went to the stove. She scooped a few ladles of stew into a clean bowl. "She sure don't deserve to starve no matter how bad things got."

Simon watched her go. He noticed—not for the first time—how well her jumpsuit fit her and how shapely she appeared from behind. If things were different... If he didn't know that someday he was going to have to leave this all behind... Still, she was here now and it wouldn't be like he was going to have to *charm* her. He had needs as much as any man and—

"SIMON!" River screamed out as she jumped from the table.

Book dropped a bowl into the sink, breaking it into three neat pieces.

"River," Simon forced a smile.

"Our patterns are failing, Simon."

Simon turned to look after Kaylee but she had already disappeared down the stairs. "So you said earlier."

"I just wanted everyone to be happy."

A loud crash sounded behind them as Book dropped another bowl. This one hit the floor and shattered, sending stew across the floor and all over Simon's pants.

"If they think they can just leave *me* to clean this crap up they are very, very wrong!" Book snapped and left the room headed toward his bunk.

Simon looked down at his pants and then slowly up at River.

"I need to change," he said.

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Mal stared at the wave-screen, trying to keep his face impassive. He was looking into a large, weapon-filled room with guns and swords and things that looked as if someone had made a gun out of sword, hanging from the walls. There were other things hanging on the wall too—bad things. Things normal buyers of *much needed medical supplies* wouldn't normally be carrying around and certainly wouldn't be so brash as to display for him to see.

"These are not people to be taken lightly," Zoe muttered from behind him.

Wash craned a neck over to where they were standing at the co-pilot's station, "What? What does that mean? Should I be flying the other way now?"

Zoe motioned him away with an upraised palm, "These don't look like the type Inara would be dealing with," she said, addressing Mal.

A round, bearded face appeared on the screen with a half grin. His oval eyes were wide and dark, and he had a tanned face with a pale scar across his nose. Mal knew from the description he and Inara had been given that this was his client.

"Sorry to keep you, Captain. I trust all is well?" Liam Chou said.

Mal pretended not to notice to sword-gun-boom thingy now partially hidden behind Chou. "Absolutely. Absolutely. Just wanted to verify coordinates, make sure there's a target where I'm pointed and all."

The round face smiled, "I am indeed here as your target, Captain Reynolds. You will make it quick I understand?"

Mal smiled and motioned a hand, unseen to Chou, toward Wash who understood and asked even more of the engines, "We're at full burn right now, should be no more than mid-day tomorrow before we intercept. I hope that's quick enough for you?"

When Chou smiled, Mal felt his belly stir. Although the man was no different than a hundred others he'd dealt with in his life, he felt his brow getting hot over this one. He wiped a damp palm on his pant leg and steadied himself on the console.

"That will be fine, Captain. We will be quite ready by the time you get here."

Chou ended the conversation on his end and the screen went black.

"I don't feel good about this," Zoe said as Mal turned to face her.

"Me either," Mal agreed. "I'll go talk to Inara. See what else she knows about this guy. I swear, I thought this was gonna be a legit run. Zoe, you're sweating. Get Kaylee on the horn and see what the hell is wrong with the temperature on this boat."

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Wash waited for Mal to leave. "Gorram whores," He said and laughed at his own attempt to make fun of Mal.

Zoe turned to him and he watched the way her sweat rolled down her neck and into her shirt. In his mind's eye he saw smooth beads against her dark skin curve into the wonderful valley between her—

"Wash, honey?"

"Um, huh?"

Zoe moved toward him in a way he'd never seen her move outside the privacy of their bunk. Her hips swayed and her long gorgeous legs strained against her tight pants. "I want babies."

"Oh," he said, reaching for the autopilot.

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In his bunk Jayne started hearing noises—not loud noises, not big clanky noises, just noises that didn't sound right. Something was scratching at the hull, moving through the bay below him, trying to be stealthy. Jayne was not easily fooled by such techniques, however. Someone had obviously stolen into the shuttle and hid from Mal and Inara because they were dumbasses and didn't think to look like he would have. He slid a big buck knife out of his boot and crept from his quarters.

He had already heard Book, Simon and River return to their rooms earlier, so he knew it wasn't none of them. Leaning over the rail, he looked down into the cargo bay. It appeared empty, so he crept down the stairs and cursed himself each time his old boots squeaked against the catwalk.

Halfway down the stairs he heard the scratching again. He was on the floor in three big steps, his weight echoing loudly, eliminating his element of surprise in favor of speed.

He stepped toward the infirmary, pausing momentarily to admire how frightening he looked in the Med Bay's dark windows. To someone hiding in the dark he would appear large and intimidating. If it was the doc's crazy-assed sister in there, well, she was in for the fright of her life. If it was her. If it weren't something else.

Like Reavers.

Jayne tried to shrug off the shiver that went down his spine. He knew better than that. There were no Reavers on this ship. It was something else. Some stowaway or some kind of damn space cat or something.

Still, *maybe* he should inch back up the bay and go grab something bigger than the knife. Nothing made the bumps in the night go boom like Vera did.

He heard the scratching noise again, like claws against metal, and knew it was definitely in the infirmary. *In the dark infirmary*. Scratching like metal and maybe a little breathing too. He blinked sweat out of his eyes and tried to ignore the burn. He wasn't about to rub them. It would mean taking his eyes away from the door, from whatever it was inside waiting to gut him like a fish.

He was definitely going back to get a gun.

Maybe two.

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He laughed silently in the darkness. He had snuck past Jayne's bunk easily enough. It was something at which he was quite good. And now he was playing games—something else he was good at. He figured the big man would have made it to the door and he was waiting to pounce on him. He felt the need to hit someone—*hard*—to flex his muscles and use the skills he had buried for so long. The brute would be a good challenge and he would fight hard and furious if he were pushed just right. A boxing match would be over too quick. He wanted Jayne filled with fear and the desire to survive. Wanted to bring out the animal and then beat him down.

He must have knocked out the cooling unit when he shorted the lights though. His skin was on fire and he fought to control his breathing. He would fight them all if he had too. If he *wanted* to. They would all finally see just who they had brought on board.

Shepherd Book smiled and wiped a drenched forearm across his brow. If he knew Jayne, he knew the big man was coming back and this time more heavily armed.

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"Hey 'Nara, brought you some stew!" Kaylee chirped as the door to the Companion's shuttle opened. "Just 'cause the Captain is a big meanie, don't mean you shouldn't eat."

Inara laughed lightly at this and stepped to the side, allowing Kaylee into her rooms. "That was nice of you, Kaylee, but I told you I wasn't hungry. That's the only reason I didn't join you for dinner—Mal had nothing to do with it."

Kaylee rolled her eyes. "Right. You'll excuse me if I don't believe you?" Placing the tray on one of the small tables beside the settee, she wiped a hand across her brow. "You finding it hot in here?"

"No, actually, it's quite comfortable." Inara looked at the stew and wrinkled her nose in distaste. "That doesn't smell very appetizing."

"It's not." Kaylee unzipped her jumpsuit and pulled the material away from her chest. "So, really, 'Nara. What were you and the Cap'n fightin' 'bout when you came back? I'm a big girl, I can handle it."

"It was nothing. Something stupid..." Inara sighed. "He said I was good at setting up jobs."

"And that made you angry why?"

"Because I'm a Companion and he knows it. I don't want to set up jobs for his smuggling and thieving. I'm a professional."

"Cap'n probably didn't mean nothing by it," Kaylee smiled. "He just likes ruffling your feathers and he...Hey—you hear that?"

"No, what?"

"That...knocking. You don't hear it?" She bit her lip, concentrating, before shaking her head. "Must've been my imagination. Now, about the Cap'n—I don't think you should let what he says bother you so much. He likes to tease, like boys do when they're interested in you. I think you should sleep with him."

"Kaylee!" Inara looked shocked. The younger girl was grinning at her, unrepentant.

"What? Don't tell me ya ain't thought about it. You're a woman, 'Nara. And he's a man—a fine-looking man who hits all kinda sparks offa you. It wouldn't be like it is with some that pays you...Did you HEAR that?"

Inara frowned as Kaylee moved towards the door of her shuttle. "Being a Companion is about more than getting paid for sex, Kaylee. I thought you understood that. And things aren't like that between Mal and I and—what are you doing?"

The younger girl had her ear pressed against the shuttle door. "There's something wrong with Serenity. Can't you hear her cryin'?"

"Kaylee..."

"Listen, 'Nara—you do what you want." Kaylee turned to her as she fumbled to open the shuttle door. "I don't see no sense in all this fancy dancing you and the Cap'n do around each other when it's obvious a roll in the sack would do you both some good, but it's your life so do what you want. I gotta go now, though. Something's wrong in the engine room."

She fought the urge to run down the hall. The noise was getting louder. Serenity was in trouble and it was going to be her fault they all died. What had she missed? Did she leave something open? Did a tool fall into the engine? The Captain was going to kill her: if she didn't kill them all first.

"Kaylee!" Mal called from behind.

"Captain." she acknowledged without stopping.

Jayne was coming up the stairs from the bay looking serious and determined.

"Kaylee," he said, keeping a tight pace, "Mal."

"Jayne?" Mal questioned as the man as he passed by him.

Simon was coming up the other stairs and noticed them all. "Kaylee!" he yelled across the room.

"Simon!" River called from below.

Jayne disappeared into the front hall heading to the safety of his bunk and Vera. Kaylee, mentally dissecting the engine, ignored Simon and entered the engine room. Simon ran across the catwalk to the rear stairs and called after Kaylee again.

Mal looked over at the door to Inara's shuttle and then down into the cargo bay where River was still looking up.

"River."

"Mal."

He headed for Inara's shuttle.

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"My brother is an idiot," River said to no one.

Behind her in the dark she heard breathing and soft steps on the infirmary floor. She heard the angry voices in her mind.

"Hello?" She stood at the door, smiling. "I know you're in there Shepherd Book. Why are you working in the dark...and crouching under the counter?"

Book said nothing.

"You know, Jayne went to get his gun. But he's scared now. I don't think he's coming back."

She walked up to the main door of the infirmary, poked her head in and reached a hand around to turn on the lights. "Are you hurt?"

The lights did not come on so she shut her eyes and stepped into the dark room and was immediately barraged by the rush of anger directed at her. The intense emotion almost threw off her balance, but she was still able to dodge Book when he lunged at her. She squeezed her eyes even tighter and listened. The room would tell her all she needed to know, and she would move like a tree in a storm, arms blocking and countering on their own like branches in a gale.

Book was mad, filled with hate and aggression and thoughts that weren't entirely his own. She tried to keep out of the way of his attacks as long as she could. Book was her friend and she didn't want to hurt him. He was enraged though, striking at her ferociously. If she didn't do something soon neither of them would ever be the same again. Lowering her shoulder, she turned her head, a million calculations running through her brain. She struck out hard, harder than she ever thought she could. When her fist connected against Book's jaw she almost fell next to him in tears.

She didn't know if she had killed him, her hands shaking as she reached out to him, a deep scream trapped in her throat. When she felt his chest rise and fall in rhythm, she sighed in relief. When she felt the thoughts streaming from his unconscious body though, she recoiled.

She knew what had scared Jayne.



Mal paused near the outside of Inara's shuttle for just a moment before walking into her room. Soft light and softer fragrances pulled him toward the center of Inara's room. His shirt was sticking to his back and he could feel sweat running down it. He felt dirty and unwelcome and he found himself pushing his hair to one side and wiping his soaked palms on his pants.

He didn't even know why he was here. He knew it was something to do with the job, something he needed to understand before they got there. But those thoughts were leaving him with each step. He felt heavy and clumsy and, at the same time, distant and lost as if he was himself a ghost haunting a life he should have never known.

When he saw her she was turned away from him facing the mirror. The olive skin of her back glowed in the soft light. Her dark hair was pulled to one side as a brush slid through it, like Serenity through the stars. A silk robe fell off her shoulders and flowed to the floor in a single sweep, creating the sense that she was actually part of the ship.

"Damn," he whispered.

Inara jumped up and turned quickly making sure the robes were tight against her, "Don't you ever knock?"

Mal stepped in further, "I've been here plenty of times. Never found it locked once."

"I never knew I had to. Maybe that's changed as well?"

"See, this is what we do. I come in, we yell, I leave. We never get anywhere. I've got all kinds of defenses, layers you've never even seen. But I'm tired of it."

"Mal, if this is some kind of joke..."

"Things ain't always been right with us," he said taking a seat on the small couch next to her dressing table, "Some of that's me, some of that's you. I know I've been hard and judgmental and that you do enjoy your stubbornness."

Mal sniffed and tried to clear his head. He leaned back and cringed as his soaked shirt pressed tighter against his back. There were shadowed and hardened places in his head that were screaming at him to get up and run back to the bridge, back to the safety of jobs and clients and not enough money, back to the empty spaces between worlds where he thrived. But he could not get himself to move. Instead, he sat nervously in her shuttle. A place he'd been a hundred times before with not so much as a thought toward not belonging there. He felt like he was thirteen again, sitting with his dusty hat in Mrs. Puli's parlor, waiting to apologize for knocking down her fence with the tractor.

"Now I know you may not want to hear any of this," he said, "And god knows I never thought I'd be saying it to you, but we're coming to a crux here. What I said earlier on today...what I said too many times...listen, I never had a problem with Companions. Not a one. If I did, do you think—"

Inara stood up, "If this is some long segue into why I'm not good enough to be on your precious ship—"

Mal reached out a sweaty palm to grab her hand, "Good enough? I never had any doubts about that, not a one. Not a single one." He kept his grip on her hand tight and sure, but she yanked it back, her face pale except for two high spots of color on her cheeks.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say here," she said backing away from the couch.

"I'm not asking you to say anything. I just had the need to come here and maybe look at you one last time."

"One last time?"

Mal lowered his head, "I know you're leaving. I've known it from the day you walked on my boat. And I resented you and I resented myself too because I knew I could never make it good enough for you to stay."

Inara stepped slowly toward him and sat on the couch, "It's not that—"

Mal looked away, words and thoughts sticking in his throat. He swallowed hard and wondered if his heart was going to come right out and make an entrance.

"As much as I wanted to though...I mean all I've seen and done and all the skies I put my head under—damn, none of this is...it's just that...I bought this boat because I couldn't stand being on the land anymore. Because everywhere I stepped someone else could tell me to get the hell off of it and even when I tried to fight I lost—"

"Mal, I know—"

"But no matter how many times I get in Serenity and leave, I'm always going to be someone who belongs on the ground. And you're not. Your whole life is moving from place to place and knowing all these...*damn* people that you do. Every time I hear that shuttle dock it's like someone taking a knife to my gut because I know you've been somewhere and with someone—hell, I never had a problem with Companions like I said. I just hate that *you're* one. Because it means you're never going to just be with me."

Inara took her hand and placed it on his forearm, her robes fell back into place exposing the smooth skin of her neck. Mal wanted nothing more than to trace that smooth column with his lips. That would tell her all the things his words were never going to be able to do.

Inara got up from the couch and walked toward the door, "I'm just going to close this now."

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By the time Simon reached the engine room, his vest was hanging open and two more buttons at the top of his shirt had been freed. Kaylee, who had been rooting through her tools, looked up and smiled when he walked in. He grinned back and leaned casually against the wall.

She looked good—she always looked good—but today, there was something different about her. Just being in the same room with her made his heart speed up. "Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?"

"Think you mentioned I was pretty, once," Kaylee replied, bending down to her tools again. "You seen my quad pry around? I need it, and it ain't where I left it."

"Forget about it for now. Why don't you take a break and we can go back to my bunk and talk." He stepped forward when he said this, crouching down beside her and placing a hand on her knee. "We never spend time together—just the two of us. I think we should rectify that."

Kaylee pushed his hand from her knee. "No can do, Simon. I gotta million things to do here, my tools are all over the place and..." she paused, cocking her head to the side. "You hear that noise? Something's loose. She's screaming at me and I don't know where."

"Forget about the engine, bao bei. I didn't hear anything." The hand Kaylee had removed from her knee lifted to her face, his fingers tracing the shell of her ear as he positioned himself closer to her. "You've been trying to get me to yourself since I came onboard—here's your chance."

"Timing's bad, though," Kaylee averred. "Cap'n depends on me to keep us flying and I ain't got time for flirtations with—you sure you don't hear nothin'?" Rising to her feet she scurried towards the back of the room, straining her head to one side. "Sounds like it's coming from over here somewheres."

With a sigh, Simon rose to his feet and followed behind her. "Kaylee—"

"Shh—can't hear nothing with you yammering. Be quiet a second." She stopped suddenly and pressed her ear up against a panel. "Think it's coming from in here." Frowning, she tried to nudge Simon out of her way. He refused to budge though, instead grabbing her hands and lifting them to his partially buttoned shirt.

"Kaylee—I've wanted this for so long." He dipped his head to her neck and nuzzled against her, pressing her into the bulkhead. She was so warm. "The only thing you hear is the beating of my heart."

She snorted at that. "I ain't got time for this. You want us to explode?"

"That's the general idea," Simon muttered. "Kaylee—"

She squeezed out from under his arms. "You know what—I think I know what the problem is." She headed back toward the engine and dropped to her knees beside a hinged access panel. "There's a rod needs lubing here I bet."

"Yes there is," Simon agreed heatedly.

"Hand me the little screw-driver over there with the red handle, will ya?"

"Fine." The tool was slapped into her hand unceremoniously. "But I think you're over-reacting."

"And I don't," her voice was muffled. "What was I thinking when I attached this to the converter?"

"You're a tease, Kaylee."

"I'm a mechanic, Simon. Now, hand me those slip gaps and shut up or leave me alone. I got a lotta work to do."

"But Kaylee..."

"I ain't here to scratch your itch—you're lookin' for a little relief, go find 'Nara—or do yourself. I'm too busy trying to keep this ship in the air right now—ain't got time for you. Now, get out."



"Ohhh, lover...that feels good." Wash groaned throatily, lifting a hand to Zoe's head and tangling his fingers in her hair. "I never knew you were so very talented...."

From her position at his feet, Zoe looked up at her husband from under her eyes and pouted. "I've been remiss in my wifely duties, then. I should massage your feet every night—you work hard all day. I should be more understanding of that."

"Yes, you should, *bao-bei*. I wear the pants in this relationship—"

"Unless I take them off you," Zoe purred. Wash smirked at that and wiggled his toes against her palm.

"Less talk and more with the foot rub, woman. Then we can talk about my pants, or lack thereof. Although, if you want to continue this naked, feel free to strip."

"Actually, darling, I wanted to talk to you about our family. I really think it's time for us to have babies." Zoe rose to her knees as she spoke, positioning herself between his thighs. "It's time, honey." Her fingers slid to the zipper of his jumper, lowering it and sliding inside, nails raking across the ribbed cotton undershirt he wore underneath. "I'm ready."

The hand Wash had tangled in her hair dropped to her shoulder before reaching up and cupping her face gently. "My darling Zoe, we've had this discussion before. What would we do with a baby? We're flying all over the universe on a smuggling ship, for Buddha's sake. Adventuring...narrowly avoiding death...shooting things...having sex whenever we want..." He growled this last bit suggestively and leaned in for a quick kiss. "A baby would just cramp our style. Trust me on this—I'm the man. I know what's best for you."

Zoe's hands were pushing down on the sleeves of his jumpsuit, helping him shrug out of it, her face wistful. "Just think about it, though. We could get a little place somewhere—give up this life. I could stay home with the children...we could be like the Fries."

"Farmers? You've got to be kidding me! I've got to fly, Zoe, you know that. A baby would just tie us down."

"You don't think I could do it, do you? You don't think I'd be a good housewife."

"*Bao-bei*, that's not true at all," Wash rose to his feet, dragging Zoe up with him as he started undoing her vest. "I just can't see myself giving up this exciting life we lead now to become a dirt farmer and father. Maybe in a few more years...when we're tired of excitement and ready to settle down...we can practice making a baby, though. I don't have any problems with that." He wagged his brows at her suggestively.

"But sweetie—"

"No, Zoe—enough. We're not ready yet and that's final. Now strip. Your husband wants to see you naked."

"Yes, husband," Zoe replied meekly. "You're the boss."

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River left Book unconscious in the dark and ran as fast as she could from the infirmary, panic welling up inside her. She knew they were all in trouble. Simon wasn't in his bunk or in the engine room with Kaylee. She couldn't feel him anywhere. His pattern was lost in the confusion of all the others echoing in her head.

She didn't know why all the patterns were shifting so much. She'd felt the shift herself when Simon had given her the drug but it had been slight. Something tiny that barely made her feel any different, just happy and calm. She'd seen all the tension on their faces. She wanted that for them. For all they'd done for her. Shiny lives for a few moments.

And then she had a flash of something else, something deeper and darker inside her own soul. It was just a faint image. People lying as still as puppets. Not sleeping.

"SIMON!" she yelled out skidding to a halt in the middle of the hall. Simon would fix this. She would tell him what she'd done and he'd fix it like he always fixed everything.

The bridge was empty but she could feel voices all around her.

Under her.

Down in the bunks.

She saw Jayne's first and ran to it. *Big Jayne. Strong Jayne.* She'd tell him about Book and then maybe he'd fix it and—

NO!

She could never tell anyone about Book. She'd seen what they'd done to Simon when she thought he wasn't her brother. What would they do to the Shepherd if they knew he'd tried to hurt her? What would they do to him if they knew what he'd been?

She banged her fists against Jayne's locked door.

"Jayne!" She yelled. "They're all in trouble. Jayne!"

She kept calling his name, beating on the door. Inside the room she felt his fear and paranoia screaming at her. He would hate her now. Have reason to hate what she'd done to him. Body quivering, she started to cry. Jayne was backed into the corner of his room, afraid. What had she done to him?

She wiped her eyes and started pounding on the door again, "Jayne, please! It's River, *It's River!*"

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"Reavers!" Jayne said out loud hunkering further into the corner, the belts of ammo and spare guns strapped to his body clinking together as he did. Gorram Reavers had been on the ship the whole time! Now they'd gone and gotten the rest of the crew and that poor girl was about to get something awful from them.

It must have been Reavers hiding in the infirmary! He'd been right to run the other way. The others didn't have his skill and they'd been captured or killed and now he was the only one left alive on this boat that could do anything about it.

Good thing he was down here with all his guns, where they'd never get him. Not alive and not without him taking out a dozen or so first. But that wouldn't be enough would it? They'd keep on coming wouldn't they? And they'd string him up and bleed him as long as they could on account of him killing so many of them.

Gorram Mal letting his boat go to pot like this.

The girl was quiet now. Everything was quiet. They'd gotten them all—every last one of them and he hadn't heard one shot. Not one shot. What had they done, thrown some of that stew at them? Lit lettuce on fire and chucked it at them?

He was sweating like he never had before and he knew it was because the Reavers had started a fire to cook his crew. It was probably burning like crazy up there. All the oxygen in the place was going up like...well like stuff that burns a lot. There was no way out. They'd burn up all his air and let him die and he'd end up some big honking hood ornament on the front of their ship.

He was dead. Dead and gone and not one of the guns was going to make a heck of a lot of difference. He'd need a bigger gun than he'd ever seen. Something big and black that went boom. He needed something that would shake the whole damn ship and send them Reavers all back to the hell they came from.

And that's when it hit him.

He began to laugh hard enough to make his head hurt and he had to wipe his hands good and hard before he could get a grip on the long skinny box under his bunk. He knew when he'd seen this sticking out under the tent flap at the gun show he had to take it. He thought maybe it had been a nice sniping rifle or hell, even a nice big bow. He had just reached down, scooped it up like he had dropped something, and thrown it on top of the other boxes. No one had given him a second look. Or at least he'd thought the one or two that did when he ran off wouldn't have said anything. And he was certain those two guards he flattened on the way out hadn't gotten a good look either.

Jayne lifted the safety locks and opened the lid, staring once more at the slim tube with the tiny fins along the casing.

"Old Jayne Cobb, they'll say, he gave them as good as he got."

The missile was heavier than she looked. He had no idea how to fire the thing but the way those fellas came after her must have meant she was something special. Special enough to blow a good sized chunk of this ship and whoever was dumb enough to come down here after him across the next three moons. He stared at the shiny metal and rubbed the length of it.

A couple here and there, he thought wiping the sweat out of his eyes and reaching for the special bag of good grenades he kept hidden, yes, that ought to do just fine.



Simon left the engine room confused and still aching for Kaylee. He had never been hotter in his life and was surprised at the amount of sweat his body was producing—it was like his whole body was on fire.

The thought of Kaylee bouncing around in that tight jumper nearly sent him back to the engine room but he knew that was a lost cause. Why did she have to pick now of all times to start hearing crazy noises and tearing the engine apart? What he wouldn't give for just ten uninterrupted minutes inside that hot room with her. He was just going to have to go back to his bunk and—

INARA!

What was wrong with him? There was a registered Companion right here on this ship. Surely she'd see the state he was in and provide relief...

He made his way to the stairwell and down toward the shuttle. He fought to redo the buttons on his shirt, pushing his hair into some semblance of order at the same time. She wasn't like Kaylee; he was going to have to look proper. He felt his jaw tighten in anticipation as he got closer.

He started to practice his speech about needing maybe a little on credit but how he'd be glad to give her a cut of his share each time they got paid. He was good for it, surely she'd know that. Stopping in front of her shuttle door, he reached back to pound on it.

"SIMON!" River yelled, running toward him.

He rolled his eyes and held out a palm, "Now, River, please. I haven't asked for much, but I need this right now. I can't keep going all the time without thinking of my own needs once in a while."

"But Simon, please, you've got to..."

"Damnit River, no! I give and I give all the time and it's all for you. Always for you!"

River's eyes opened wide and she took a step back from him, "I know. I know what you did for me and I wanted you to be happy too. Happy like you're always trying to make me. I didn't want it bad like this. I didn't mean for your pattern to change. I want you back. I need you back here with me, Simon."

Bracing herself on the railing she began to cry, staring at him as if he had beaten her. It nearly killed him. His world began to spin and his stomach began to burn. The sadness and regret he'd thought he'd buried deep inside churned and pushed their way into his thoughts. He lurched and fought against them before hurling himself against the wall, closing his eyes against the sight of River.

Keeping his forehead pressed against the cool metal, he tried to slow his breathing. River grabbed his shoulder and stroked his head.

"I'm sorry, Simon. I'm sorry. They're all falling apart. I didn't mean it. I didn't," she told him through her sobs.

Simon wiped his mouth on his damp sleeve and tried his best to smile. "River, it's going to be okay. I can make this better. Just tell me what it is that you did."

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Book woke up groaning and wondered if his jaw had been broken. Touching his fingers to it tentatively, he tried to ignore the hot shards of pain and rose to his feet. He had been stupid to think he could take her on—he was good, but he wasn't that good. Seven years of inactivity had weakened him. His reflexes weren't as sharp and, much as he hated to admit it, he was getting old. Besides, it was obvious she had been trained well. Better than him. He had underestimated the ease with which he'd be able to take her down.

He felt like a man just waking up after a long sleep. For the last seven years, his life as a Shepherd—a passive man of peace—had been a sham. He wasn't that man, had never been that man, would never be that man again.

With an angry growl he left the infirmary and headed toward his quarters. He was glad he hadn't thrown out the mini-Link he'd found in Dobson's bunk, although at the time he hadn't realized what he'd kept it for. He knew now though. He had kept it because it had represented his old life; a way *back* to his old life. River Tam was his return ticket—he'd be a fool not to use her. The fact that he'd be the one beating her only made it that much sweeter. He had always believed in retribution.

The Link was where he'd left it, hidden in a niche under his bunk. Whipping out his ident-card, he inserted it into the slot and punched in his old access code. The tiny screen flashed at him, the Blue Sun logo blinking in welcome. Tapping the small pad, he quickly connected to the one man he knew wouldn't ask questions.

He was gratified to note the small flash of surprise that flickered across Hodges' face when the other man recognized him. "It's you. I thought you'd retired."

Book smirked at that. "Hodges. I got her."

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Simon was fighting to stay conscious. He'd given himself a shot of adrenaline to keep him sharp, but if the others were half as bad as he felt, they were all in serious trouble. Pouring the drugs into the stew was bad enough but he suspected the old proteins and the slow cooking times had produced a chemical reaction that had somehow turned the combination into an unpredictable substance.

The infirmary's lights would not come on and he fumbled around for the emergency lights on the table for a few moments before finding them. The room was a mess. It looked as if someone had thrown a chair into the storage cabinets. He searched the floor where some cases had fallen, running his hands carefully over the broken glass and cursing.

He didn't know if what was happening to them was something they could sleep off or something that would cause permanent damage, but he didn't want to take any chances. He was going to have to find something to counteract the known drugs in their systems, but right now he just couldn't see straight and his head was hurting like hell.

"Book's not there anymore," River said from outside the Med Bay.

"What?" Simon asked her looking around the room. "I'm not looking for him. Listen, I'm going to need your help. You're going to have to find me a light or something."

"Mal's not going to like this," she said nervously. "It's going to be bad soon."

"I can't help that now. We'll have to deal with that when the time comes. Please, River, I'm not sure how much longer I can stay conscious."

"Simon?"

River was still standing at the door. "What?!" he yelled at her.

"The cargo."

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Kaylee stared at the parts she'd taken off the thruster coils and the ignition sequencer from the main drive. The noise persisted and she knew at any moment the engine was going to fly apart and tear Serenity up from the inside out. While she knew she'd be here when it happened and her punishment would be swift, the thought of failing the others almost brought her to tears.

The heat buildup in the engine room was immense. She couldn't believe the metal casings were holding together without so much as a buckle or crack. That just made it worse for her because that meant the heat was coming from the reactor. If that went there wouldn't be enough left of them to make a snow globe.

Frustrated and exhausted she smashed the decoupling wrench against the hull. She put her hand on one of the support beams and closed her eyes, the screams of the machine driving her to the ground.

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Simon tore through the contents of the cargo as fast as he could. He'd given himself a shot of adrenaline, the only thing he could find in the infirmary that he was sure wouldn't kill him immediately and would hopefully keep him from passing out.

Most of the drugs in the boxes were common stuff found almost anywhere and he couldn't imagine why anyone would want to pay someone to rush a delivery of it. However at the center of each box were a small group of vials with no labels and only a sliver of clear glass through which he could see a deep red liquid. He piled them on top of the other boxes so he could look at them later.

He didn't find the Anfredrin that River had told him about earlier until the fourth box and there was so little of it that he wasn't sure it was going to be enough for everyone. He loaded what he could into the injectors and pocketed the rest.

"Is that what you needed?" River asked.

Simon looked at her and smiled weakly. The adrenaline was already starting to wear off and he felt light-headed.

"I think so. You did good, *mei-mei*. We'll get through this."

His vision went black for a moment and he heard a loud crash and the sound of boxes falling around him.

River called out to him and he snapped awake. He was sitting on one of the boxes and some others had spilled out their contents around him. The weird vials had fallen from the top of the stack though and were now emptying their contents on the floor.

Mal was going to kill him.

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They found Kaylee on the floor. Her skin was bright red but her breathing was deep and sounded good to Simon. He knew he couldn't trust all of his thoughts just now as the effects of everything in his system made him feel heavy, like he was moving through shadows, but he couldn't help thinking how amazing she was. He had taken her for granted, not stopping to realize she was the only thing keeping them all alive.

Her naiveté and constant optimism had annoyed him at first but now it seemed so integral, so utterly Kaylee, that if she were any other way he wouldn't want to be with her as much as he did. With a sigh, he gave her the injection and gently brushed her hair from her face.

Kaylee moaned slightly as the drugs went into her body.

"Should we try to carry her back to her room?" River asked nervously.

"No we need to get to the others. She'll be fine here. She's just going to sleep very well for a while."

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Mal was so close to her now that she could feel the heat flying in waves from his body.

"Are you okay?" She asked him, trying not to look him in those deep blue eyes staring at her from the couch. "You're sweating a lot now."

He licked his lips and swallowed, "It's just hot in here and I'm havin' a hard time thinking about anything but you right now. Is that jasmine?"

Inara barely heard his words. She was watching his lips as he inched even closer to her. She felt an answering heat rise within herself, her robe feeling heavy, like a wool blanket pressing her into the couch. She didn't know what to do. All these things he was saying to her, everything she thought he wasn't able or willing to say...all the things she got wrong when trying to dissect him a thousand times over in the night—he was saying them now. She didn't know if she could trust him.

"What?" she managed, when his question finally registered.

"Jasmine...I smelled it on the shuttle...is that what you have on now?"

Inara nodded, gasping as Mal reached out and ran his hand up the sleeve of her robe, stopping at her shoulder and caressing it gently. She wonder what her mother would say if she could see her now—about to be ravaged by a pirate scoundrel.

"Mal," she murmured, "why are you telling me all this now? What do you hope to gain from this?"

Mal smiled at her and the openness and joy on his face sent her into full panic mode. She had never seen him look so happy, so carefree—so young. A million tiny bubbles exploded in her stomach. Her heart felt as if it were about to burst. She smiled back and reached out, running her hand gently through his hair.

He twisted his head to the side and kissed her palm tenderly, sending wave after wave of electric shocks into her soft places. "Always...wanted...so much...Inara."

"Mal..."

"Inara!" Simon yelled from the open door, "Is Mal in...oh."

Inara jumped up at the sound of her name and Mal fell forward into the couch when she moved.

"Do I need to start welding that *cào* thing shut?! What is it Simon?"

Simon blushed, "I needed to find Mal, something's gone wrong with the stew, making everyone sick. Hot and fatigued maybe." He looked at Mal who was still face down on the couch. "It might be taking on different forms in each person though."

Inara stared at Simon in disbelief, "*What?*"

"Yeah, look I don't have time to explain it all. I want to give everyone who ate the stew a shot to help the effects wear off, maybe keep things from getting worse. Did you eat any?"

Simon moved behind her and checked Mal's vitals.

"No," she said still stunned from the news, "Kaylee brought me some but I didn't have it... He seemed perfectly...normal. He was very talkative, very, um lucid even."

"He ate a decent amount," he said, sending the injection into Mal's arm. "Twice what I did and I'm barely hanging on here with an adrenaline shot. It twists your thoughts. I barely remember what I said to Kaylee but I think it wasn't really me talking."

Inara felt the blood rush out of her face, "Simon, are you *sure?*"

"Sure?" he returned. "I'm not sure about anything right now. Things are already getting fuzzy from ten minutes ago, so I need to get to the others. Are you positive you didn't have any of the stew?"

She nodded and Simon stood to leave, "Where are you going? You can't leave him here."

"I barely have the strength to walk, Inara, I can't carry him. I can help move him to the bed maybe."

"The hell you will," she said remembering the loose robe and pulling it around her, fighting the sinking feeling in her chest as it slid past the spot Mal's lips had just been on her. She read the look on his face and grunted her acceptance.

"*Pi huà*"

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Simon heard the door to Jayne's bunk hiss and then let out a loud clank as the lock disengaged.

"You got it!" he yelled down the hall to River, where she had been trying to override the manual lock, and jumped into the room.

Jayne stood there in front of him, pointing a very large weapon at him. The long tube was barely held up under one arm and he was leaning heavily against the wall. In each hand he held a large silver grenade with the arming pins clearly pulled half way out. His clothes were soaked with sweat and he was breathing through his mouth heavily.

"Jayne," Simon said trying to inch closer, "I don't know what you're thinking right now but I need you to put that stuff down...very carefully."

Jayne's eyes slowly tracked him, "Doc, I thought you was a Reaver. I coulda blown us all up with this here missile."

"There are no Reavers, Jayne," Simon stammered out, reaching for the tip of the missile.

"No Reavers?" Jayne repeated blearily, barely reacting when River jumped down into the bunk. "*Riiiveerrr*. Now ain't that a hoot."

Jayne let his arms relax, letting the missile and the grenades drop from his grasp, snickering when Simon and River both recoiled. "It don't work like that you dumb m̃aos."

Simon rushed forward and let the big man rest his respectable weight on him, giving him the shot awkwardly.

"Goin' to sleep now," Jayne stumbled forward and fell on his bunk, almost dragging Simon down with him.

"What about your guns?"

"Leave 'em," Jayne mumbled. He was snoring within seconds.



Wash and Zoe's cabin was bigger than most and probably had been meant for the Captain of the ship. Mal had obviously let the two lovers have it, but Simon would have loved to have heard that conversation. At one point he was sure it had been a nice room too, very neat and clean the way Zoe ran most of her life. That, however, was all in the past. The room now appeared as if someone had given life to both all their clothes and all their linens and then set them upon each other in a fight to the death.

Zoe, her bare form barely covered by a thin sheet lay face down on the bed. It looked as if she had been covered in haste. The room smelled of sweat and love. It was not helping Simon to keep steady.

"Last man looked at my wife like that got his brains all spilled out of his head," Wash said stumbling in from the bathroom, an empty bottle in his hand. He was totally naked except for a wet towel on his head and a single fuzzy slipper he had somehow managed to get on his foot. "You know, Zoe's got a lot of guns around here."

"I'm a doctor, Wash. I've seen naked people before you know."

"Not my Zoe, you haven't"

"Look, I don't have a lot of time here. I need to give you both a shot."

Wash laughed and walked over to the bed. "Will it wake her ass up? Poor girl didn't make it much past round twelve." He slapped the mattress next to her. "Gave it to her good this time, Doc. Reaaal good."

Simon tried not to laugh. "I'm sure you did, but this won't wake her. It will make you both sleep actually."

"Well who needs to sleep? The night is young!"

Simon shook his head ruefully. "You'll be getting those shots now."

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The adrenaline was almost through his system now and the effects of the false stimulation had taken its toll. It had been all he could do just to manage Wash back to bed with his wife and now he felt his legs buckle and starting to fail. River was trying to support him.

"Simon, I think you need to lie down now," River told him.

Simon put a hand down to keep from falling. "We still need to give Shepherd Book his shot."

"I can do it."

Simon wanted to tell her he was okay, but she was reading him too well now. "Are you sure? I haven't even seen him since this all started. He could be anywhere now."

"I know where he is, I'll take care of him," she replied. "Let me give you your shot now. You should have taken yours first"

"I'd be asleep in the med lab if I had. I couldn't take that risk."

"You're not going to make it to your bed."

"Kaylee's bunk is closer anyway. I wish *she* was." He grinned at the thought of sleeping in her bed, the way the sheets and pillow would smell like her. "You're going to be okay, right?"

River watched Simon turn and stumble down the hall before she leaned against the wall herself and closed her eyes. She had told Simon she was going to take care of Book and she was—only not the way her brother had thought.

She knew he wasn't Book right now. He was someone else—someone deadly. If she tried to medicate him they would both end up seriously injured. She couldn't fight *and* try to make him better. She could feel his thoughts stabbing at her. He was Judas, but it was her fault.

Quietly, aware that any noise could give her away, she crept toward his quarters.

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By the time Book realized that River was outside his door, it was too late to do anything about it—he was sealed in his room. His brain worked frantically as it tried to recall what Wash had said about overriding the locks from the inside, but he was finding it harder and harder to concentrate. He was so hot. His vision swam and his eyes burned. He felt as if his heart was going to burst out of his chest. It occurred to him just before he passed out that River knew what he had done—she knew, and she had somehow managed to poison him. He was going to die and it was his own fault—he had been out of the game too long and had lost his edge. Underestimating River had been a big mistake. He only hoped Hodges would come through for him.

Stumbling to the door, he leaned against it weakly. "I know you're out there, girl." His voice was guttural—harsh. "It's too late to stop me... you hear what I'm saying to you? It's too late; they know where you are."

He pressed his forehead against the cool metal and started laughing. "You might have killed me, girl, but I've killed you too."

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Inara watched Mal as he slept and tried to figure out what she was going to do now. Not even an hour ago, he had been telling her things she never thought she'd hear him say—and she had been listening.

If Simon hadn't arrived when he had, who knows what would have happened. She liked to think that she would have graciously shown him the door, but she knew that wasn't true. She wanted him—she had almost from the first moment she'd set eyes on him, and that feeling had only grown as she got to know him.

What that said about her, she didn't really know. She was a Companion, had spent years in the training house learning how to avoid entanglements, and yet... her first time away from the watching eyes of the guild, an entanglement was exactly what she'd found.

The question she needed to ask herself was this: was she willing to throw everything away because of him? Right now, the answer was no. In another couple of weeks—who knew what the answer would be.

With a sigh, she turned back to the settee and settled into it. She couldn't keep putting off the inevitable. She needed to leave.

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Long after Book had finally fallen asleep, River remained sitting outside his quarters. She had breathed a sigh of relief when she'd felt his pattern reform and slide back into place several hours ago, but had not returned to her room. Instead, she had stretched out in front of his doorway and vowed to keep him safe. It was her fault he had been broken.

She knew it hadn't been Book she'd locked in that room. It had been someone else—someone he'd buried deep inside—the man he'd been before he became Shepherd Derrial Book. He had scared her, almost as much as the Blue Hands scared her. She had seen his ghosts and they had wanted vengeance.

Book had more secrets than she did. And now she knew them all.

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"Kaylee?" Simon murmured sleepily, throwing an arm around the pillow he was cuddled into and burying his face in it. The smell of strawberries and engine grease and sunshine particular to the little engineer teased him, enticing him from his dreams into a relaxed state of wakefulness. It had been years since he'd slept so well and months since his dreams had been so pleasant.

The sheet was pooled around his waist and he wondered vaguely where Kaylee had gone. He distinctly remembered...he remembered...nothing. But she had been here, with him—he was sure of it. How else to explain the looseness of his muscles and the feeling of sated well-being filling him?

"Kaylee?" Something solid was digging into the small of his back. Reaching down, he grabbed a wrench, pulling it free of the sheets and up to his face. Opening a bleary eye, he looked at it and grinned. Kaylee was the only girl he knew who would sleep with her tools. He found it oddly appealing. Dropping the wrench to the floor, he stretched and sat up.

He was in Kaylee's quarters, which should have been obvious the minute he'd woken up. Looking around her room, he scratched his chest and wondered why he couldn't remember the events that had led to his presence here. For that matter, why was he still fully clothed?

And where was Kaylee?

Had he done something—again—to offend her? Had he somehow hurt her? Forced her from her rooms, away from him? He must have, because otherwise she would have stayed with him.

He needed to find her and apologize. With a sigh, he headed toward the engine room, buttoning his shirt as he went and hoping she would forgive him.

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If she didn't know better she'd think someone had sabotaged the engine room. Panels hung open, wires hanging loose—some even ripped from the wall and lying on the floor. When she'd first woken up and seen the damage she'd panicked, thinking Jubal Early had somehow returned. It wasn't until she'd sat up and realized she had fallen asleep holding a soldering iron that she'd realized she was the one who had hurt Serenity.

The worst part of it was she didn't remember doing it. She couldn't remember anything at all prior to dinnertime. She only hoped she could figure out what she'd done and get it fixed before the Cap'n or anyone else came looking for her.

"Kaylee?" Simon's tentative voice made her jump.

"Simon, hi!" she said, overly brightly. "What're you doin' here?"

"I wanted to apologize to you, for whatever I might have said or done to upset you..."

"Outside the normal?" she teased.

He nodded miserably. "I just hope, whatever it was, we can still be friends. I wouldn't want to hurt you, ever. Can we be friends, Kaylee?"

"Just friends?"

"Just friends," he echoed.

She frowned at him. "Well, sure...I guess. Friends. Ain't that just dandy."

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, she turned back to the engine. "If that's all, I gotta get back to work. These parts ain't going to put themselves back on."

"Oh, uh...of course," Simon agreed. "Do you...would you like me to stay and help you with anything? Hand you tools as you need them?"

Kaylee gritted her teeth, her back towards him. "No thank you," she replied coldly. "Think I can handle this on my own."

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Inara knew the minute Mal woke up. From her position on the settee, she heard the indrawn hiss of his breath and his confused mutter as he slowly sat up. From underneath heavy lids she watched him, pretending the whole while that she was asleep when the truth was she hadn't slept all night. Instead, she had stayed awake and listened to his heavy breathing. From what Simon had said, she knew Mal probably wouldn't remember anything they had discussed last night. He wouldn't even remember coming to her in the first place. She wasn't sure if she wanted him to—remembering on her own hurt enough.

When he approached her and reached out to touch her shoulder, she wanted to open her eyes and tell him everything he had said to her last night—demand to know if he had been telling her the truth. Instead she waited to see what he would do next, unable to get her mouth to move, not understanding why or how all of her years of training could fail her when she needed it the most.

She felt his hand leave her shoulder, listened as he turned from her and moved towards the door. When he paused there, she thought she would break. She didn't know how she kept herself from crying until the door opened and he disappeared into the hall outside it.

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"*Renci de Fozu*," Wash groaned, as he forced his crusted eyes open and looked blearily at the ceiling in his quarters. "What the hell happened?"

His head felt like it had been beaten in with a hammer. "Zoe," he muttered when she nuzzled into him whimpering, "you sure we don't have a pet? I feel like a cat died in my mouth."

"No pets," she mumbled into his shoulder before pushing herself away from him with a sigh. "Where are we?"

"I think we're in our quarters, but I don't remember coming here." He tried to grin, but gave up when he realized how much it made his face hurt. "You obviously dragged me here for wild sex, you Amazon."

"Why is your jumpsuit hanging from the ceiling?"

Wash grinned at that—gingerly—and reached out and stroked Zoe's back. "I told you, you're an Amazon."

When she didn't reply, he sat up behind her and kissed her shoulder. "I can't blame you for wanting to get a piece of me. I am a prime piece of man-meat and..." his voice trailed off as he absorbed the state of their quarters. "Mal transporting wild animals again?"

"That ain't funny, baby." Zoe rose to her feet and stepped carefully over the clothes strewn all over the room. "Looks like someone ripped this place apart."

To the left of the bed, the small dresser they used had been overturned, the drawers ripped out and lying in the middle of the room. Zoe's one concession to vanity—a framed mirror—hung askew on the wall. Their shelves had been swiped clean. Wash slid from the bed to his knees and started crawling around on the floor. "Where are my dinosaurs?"

"Husband," Zoe replied calmly, "you've got bigger things to worry about right now."

"Really?" Wash snorted. "Like what?"

"Like who's flying."

" *Da-xiang bao-zha-shi de la du-zi*, Mal is going to kill us!!" Wash scrambled to his feet, reaching for his coveralls. "Help me find my underwear!"



Mal was the first one willing to stick his head over the edge, "I don't like it one damn bit." He turned to face the others who had gathered around him in the gallery that morning. "And no one remembers a thing, huh?"

Book looked back almost meekly, one side of his face puffy and raw. "Wish I did, Captain. Wish I did."

"No one does," Simon offered. "River says she remembers some. I suppose it's possible her meds could have countered the effects."

"I don't like it," Mal said again.

"I tell you what," Wash said, limping over to the pot and sticking his face down in it, "I wish to god I *did* remember something. You should have seen our bunk when we woke up. I hurt in places I didn't know a man could hurt."

"That's 'cause you probably been doin' it wrong the whole time, little man," Jayne said, scratching his behind as he walked into the galley. "I slept like a gorram angel."

"Sorry to have missed that," Book said to him.

Jayne looked the Shepherd over, "Nice shiner, preacher. You get that prayin'?"

"Oh I'm sure that's it exactly," Book replied. "Mind if I check you knuckles?"

Jayne shrugged off the question and went straight for the pot. "Hell, who went and let it all burn up?"

"Someone must have left it simmering all night," Simon answered. "It's nothing but charred material now."

Mal stared at Simon, "No way to look into what caused that? I have a hard time believing it was just protein messed us up like that."

"I barely have a medical facility down there, certainly not a crime lab."

Mal gave him the eye, "So how'd you know what to give us? I mean, when you trashed my cargo, seems like you had a strong intent on something."

Simon sighed. "River told me you had medicine before we ate, remember? And Anfredrin was the right thing to use to counter the effects. We were just lucky I guess."

"I don't like it," Mal repeated.

"So I've noticed."

"Where's your sister now?"

"Sleeping. Apparently she was up all night taking care of us."

"Well, I for one am just damn glad the autopilot worked," Wash said. "I mean we're right on course still and nothing seems broken or damaged up there...for a change."

"Wish I could say the same for the engine," Zoe said stepping into the room. "Kaylee says she'll have it all back together. We're lucky she didn't touch anything to shut down the main drive or we could have drifted into god knows what."

"Lucky she didn't tear out the life support or open the containment field," Mal agreed testily, "Lucky the doc here just happened to have what he needed in the cargo. Lucky I didn't..." He shook his head angrily. "Luck is not something we ever had and if we did, I assure you it's all run out now. And it ain't luck going to get us out of this deal either. If what the doc says is true, our Mr. Chou is going to be a might pissed that he's not getting his stuff intact."

"Illegals?" Zoe asked.

"Bad ones," Simon offered.

"We're going to have to give him something," Zoe said, "Half pay maybe. You saw that small weapons bunker he was broadcasting from—people like that don't tend to be forgiving. Not sure what an arms dealer needs with drugs though."

"Other way around more than likely," Mal said. "Drug dealer with a heavy weapon fetish."

Wash moaned at that, "That's not worse right? I mean tell me that's not worse."

"It's worse," Zoe told him.

Mal turned to Jayne who was poking the charred stew with his finger, "Fortunately—luckily that is—I think it might work out."

Jayne looked up to see them all staring at him, "What? You guys said it was ruined."

Mal patted the big man on his shoulder and then made his way toward the rear door, "I'm gonna check on Kaylee. Someone put that pot out the airlock before Jayne starts humping his guns again."

"I'M ON IT!" Book and Simon said simultaneously staring at each other.



Mal paused outside the open door to Inara's shuttle stopping himself just short of barging into the ship like he always did. Instead he gathered his thoughts and rapped lightly on the bulkhead.

"It's open," Inara called from inside.

Mal stepped in and made his way to where she was. He found her ripping all the sheets off the bed.

"Laundry day," she said seeing his look.

Mal wasn't sure why but he felt a pang at hearing that, "Well, we're almost at the rendezvous. I know this was your deal and all but—"

"Mal, look, I said I was sorry already. If I had any idea that my client on Churchill was mixed up in drug smuggling...I can assure you what he did will not go unnoticed by the Guild."

Mal smiled, "I feel sorry for him already. Honestly, I do. But I'm not worried about that. I know you wouldn't have done anything on purpose."

Inara stopped with the bed and looked up, "Oh right...um... thanks. I wouldn't you know. I know what your reputation means to you."

Mal noticed she looked upset, "Look, I just came by...I know none of us remembers a thing. It's just that if you did remember something—"

"I really don't. Not a thing," she said through what Mal could tell was a forced smile, "I wish I did though because I'd like to know who thought it was okay to fold me up on the settee while you got to spread out on the bed."

Mal listened to that last word trail off a bit as she said it, "Well, I'm a big man. And the Captain. I'm sure it was your own sense of duty to let me do that."

"It doesn't explain *why* you were here though, does it?" Inara asked, obviously trying to break his ego back down to size.

"Nope," Mal said turning to leave, "But I guess we're just going to have to live with that mystery for now."

"Mal?" Inara called to him as he was pushing through the curtains.

"Yeah?"

"I just want you to know that you're...well, that you should be proud. I mean all these people depend on you and you always get us through these situations. You should never worry about not being good enough."

Mal felt the bottom go out of his gut; he turned his head but kept his body firmly planted toward the door, "Inara-

"Don't get all emotional on me," she said balling up the sheets and tossing them into the corner, "You looked tired and I know things haven't been going well for a long time now. I just thought you should know that I do respect you—most of the time anyway. And that I appreciate all you've done for me."

"That maybe sounds like a goodbye speech."

"No," she said looking up at him, "It's not."

Mal nodded, "I have to check on Kaylee now."

"You should."



Liam Chou's docking bay smelled like burned rubber and oil. All the weapons on all the walls and in the racks bore a highly polished sheen, more like trophies than protection. When they had stepped off the shuttle with what remained of the cargo, Mal had scanned the entire bay for signs of heavier weapons and he knew Chou was going to go for the deal.

Now, as they left him in the bay holding Jayne's missile, smiling to all the world as if he'd just been handed the keys to the promised land, Mal wondered if he shouldn't have asked for more than just full pay. He also wondered if maybe arming a drug smuggler with an air-to-air weapon had been the most prudent of choices.

"You know, whoever Jayne got that thing from isn't likely to stop coming after us anytime soon," Zoe said, keeping up with Mal's quick strides.

"Well *if* they find us I bet they'll be even worse off after standing in that line of others waiting to do the same."

"Getting *paid* is a nice change of pace though," Zoe said smiling.

"Don't know why we had to go and get rid of Gretchen," Jayne scowled. "Not like I was the one went and busted up Chou's stuff."

"You know, maybe if you'd stop naming all your weapons after women, you'd stop wanting to have relations with them," Zoe said reaching the shuttle first and ducking through the door before Jayne could reply.

"I guess you noticed ain't none of them named Zoe," Jayne said. "And if I find out who stole into my bunk with that damn capture they're gonna be the next thing we make stew out of."

Mal gave a cursory check to the shuttle and then followed them inside. He moved into the pilot's seat and started up the engines, pulling away slowly when they geared up enough thrust. He banked sharply to the right and gave the throttle a push. When Serenity appeared in the view this time, he took sharp notice that his first rush of emotion was not for his ship. He cursed lightly under his breath and spent the rest of the trip pained by the ghost of things he could not remember.

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